

LIBERTY CALL

Midway is for the birds...



The Midway Islands Atoll -- a United States territory -- lies at the northwest end of the Hawaiian Island Archipelago, 1,250 miles from Honolulu. The populated, larger Sand Island (bottom left) is where visitors stay at Midway. Smaller Eastern Island's (top right) World War II runways are being reclaimed by nature, but they remain a visible reminder of World War II activity.

Editor's note: Midway Island recently held a ceremony honoring the 58th anniversary of the battle that turned the tide of World War II. Midway Island now is a national Wildlife Refuge and open to visitors year around. This week and next, we will focus on what the atoll offers its visitors and what changes have come of the historic island since its famous battle in 1942.

but you're invited to visit

There may be no more fitting place to "escape" than a visit to the remote and historic Midway Islands Atoll. Known to most through the World War II "Battle of Midway", they are located 150 miles east of the International Dateline, 2,800 miles west/southwest of San Francisco, 2,200 miles east of Japan and 1,250 miles west-northwest of Honolulu. Midway is the second in a series of volcanic islands that form the western end of the Hawaiian Island Archipelago. Sand Island, the populated, larger island, covers three square miles. The smaller Eastern Island lies just off its coast where nature is reclaiming the aging World War II runways. Midway served as a Navy base for more than 50 years before it was eventually declared a National Wildlife Refuge on October 31, 1996. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Midway Phoenix Corporation has an agreement that allows 100 visitors to enjoy the coral atoll and islands at any given time. Today Midway is becoming known as one of the most beautiful and remote wildlife sanctuaries in the world. Over a million seabirds and migrating shore birds call the islands home. When the Navy occupied the tiny island, more than 3,500 people lived here. Some estimate the number actually reached around 10,000 people when the fleet hit port. Now 150 humans -- and millions of animals -- call Midway home. Since the Navy's departure in 1996, Midway has "returned to nature," and many of the buildings and facilities have been removed. "It's a great indicator of the human spirit," said Steve Dryden, a military veteran and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service ranger at Midway. "We've evolved to a point where we know we have to give back to nature."



The Clipper House restaurant overlooks Sand Island's white North Beach and is a perfect spot to catch a Pacific sunset. The Clipper House is one of a few buildings built by Midway Phoenix Corporation for new island visitors.

IN THE SKY
As a wildlife refuge, Midway is literally "for the birds." The famous albatross, or "gooney bird" is a big part of the island's demographics, occupying nearly every square yard of the island during breeding season. They lay their eggs in December and the young are hatched by mid-February. The birds leave the island from July through September. A number of other species of sea birds also reside here for photographers and naturalists to enjoy, including other species of albatross, the red- and white-tailed tropic bird, petrels, terns, boobies and various migratory birds. "Boobies got their name from Portuguese sailors who called the birds 'bobo' which means clown," said Dryden. "It kind of developed from 'bobo' to 'boobie.'"

ON THE GROUND
The tight-knit people of Midway lend an international flair to the island. Of course you'll meet United States citizens, but the culture base here also comes from Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Philippines, France and countless other places from around the globe. They all claim there are no strangers here and it is rare to pass anyone on the island without a friendly greeting of some sort. The Fish and Wildlife Service makes environmental education a priority for visitors to preserve the natural beauty and future of the island. Guests are briefed on natural resources and invited to take part in various wildlife research projects.

Next week: "Around Town" looks at the small town life on Midway, and "Under the Water" looks at undersea adventures on that are offered.

Story and Photos by JO2 Sean Hughes



As a wildlife sanctuary,(left) Midway has become a peaceful oasis for seabirds, migrating shore birds and marine life. The atoll has the world's largest population of Laysan albatross, better known as the "goonies" or "goony birds." Fifteen seabird species -- nearly 2 million birds -- nest on the atoll each year.

Destination: Midway (above) is the island's sport fishing, diving and eco-tour host. They provide everything visitors need for diving, snorkelling or fishing excursions. Visitors must comply with Midway's regulations to protect wildlife. Fishermen learn about the island's "CPR" policy, which stands for "Catch, Photograph and Release."